

*Testimony Provided to the House Education and the Workforce Committee*

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Chairman Kline, Representative Miller, members of the committee, I thank you for the opportunity to present today to the House Education and the Workforce Committee some thoughts on the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the extraordinary opportunity Congress has in considering its re-authorization. Our state's story will reflect well on many provisions entailed within No Child Left Behind (NCLB). But there is much that needs to be changed. A strong reauthorization would benefit our nation's schools and children greatly.

I will base much of what I have to say on our experiences in Louisiana, and in the city of New Orleans most notably. That city's system of autonomous public and private schools, ranked lowest in our state for years, and taken over almost entirely by the state-run Recovery School District six years ago, now graduates students from high school at a higher rate than our state average and, among African-Americans, at a higher rate than the national average.

That success starts with a simple blend of four policies that allows for coherent planning at each school: 1.) Empowered charter school leadership and governance, where schools receive 98 cents for every dollar of state and local revenue; 2.) Uncompromising accountability based on long-term results; 3.) Citywide parental

choice of public and private schools, facilitated by government; 4.) Long-term investments in a pipeline of talented principals and teachers.

Together, these principles form a simple framework for improvement: set a goal, let the educators figure out how to achieve it, give parents a choice of where to send children and resources, and stock the system with strong teachers and leaders.

A particular moment comes to mind when illustrating the power of these principles. A couple years ago I visited ASPIRE Academy, an elementary school in the 9<sup>th</sup> Ward of New Orleans, a neighborhood particularly devastated by Hurricane Katrina. The school, then in its second year, was founded by a former administrator of a KIPP charter school and had replaced a long-struggling traditional district school. Discussing his plans for the future, he told me that if the school was going to meet its four-year performance targets – an achievement required for the school to remain in our system – he knew that he needed more time with his students, and he knew that his staff would have to provide each child more than just academic classroom instruction.

“We are going early morning to late evening,” he told me. “Three meals a day, full art and music curriculum for every student, and two hours more learning than we are getting today.”

Surprised, given the young age of the students, I asked him why he thought the school should go in that direction.

“First, my parents are asking for it. My kids aren’t getting it at home. It’s what’s necessary to get them on track.”

He continued: “And the reason we are able to do it is that the central office doesn’t run the school; the educators run the school, and the parents chose this school. A grant manager downtown doesn’t tell us how to spend our children’s money. We have our school’s plan for our school’s kids, and all of our resources are focused on that.”

It is worth saying that the New Orleans model of empowered, accountable schools was predated by NCLB’s push to identify low-performing schools and to improve them. This is an important legacy of that law.

But it is also worth saying that the simplicity of the New Orleans model – one where educators and parents rather than bureaucrats make choices on behalf of the kids they know and serve – exists in spite of the federal role and its complexities, not because of it.

Therein lies the critical challenge to a quality reauthorization of ESEA: Congress must promulgate a framework of accountability, choice, and high quality teaching

while keeping its parameters simple for leaders of states, districts, and schools, whose greatest challenge day to day is achieving coherent planning around the needs of students.

### Empowered Leadership

The vehicle for implementing this framework should be one simple set of parameters from the federal government and one plan from each state. It is time we acknowledge that the fragmented federal structure that gives each title and grant its own bureaucracy, mirrored in every state agency and district central office in America, is among our greatest barriers to progress. It pulls educators in different directions when the great struggle of a school is to get everybody working together.

In Louisiana, we have condensed 26 federal grants into one common application for dollars from school districts. Our districts are using new flexibilities, allowing them to spend on critical services central to their plans for change.

We need more movement in this direction. Progress starts with allowing educators to think for themselves and to innovate in response to accountability. Congress should streamline grant requirements. States should propose how to distribute federal dollars in ways that align with their own funding formulas.

States that won't work within the federal parameters should not take federal dollars. States that cannot achieve the performance goals entailed in their plans should receive fewer funds.

We must dispense with reports that go unused, incessant grant applications, contradictory planning processes, and inconsistent spending requirements. That starts with simplifying the federal framework into one simple set of parameters and one simple plan from each state.

#### Accountability for Results

The federal parameters should both call for state accountability systems that commit to results, especially among historically disadvantaged students, and allow states to innovate on measures themselves. In Louisiana, our accountability system is evolving to include not just grade level proficiency and graduation rates, but also real-world college and career attainment measures such as Advanced Placement results, dual enrollment credit, and post-secondary employment attainment. Our system is also evolving toward greater incorporation of individual student progress as a way of measuring school and district performance. Federal parameters should compel states to design systems in line with these principles, but states should have freedom to craft measures.

The ultimate promise on which states should deliver is student achievement, and federal funds awarded should in part be predicated on demonstrated outcomes. To that end, states should also articulate long-term performance objectives and annual benchmarks along the way.

States are policy laboratories, and we should not limit continued innovation in accountability systems. The federal government is right to define parameters for strong accountability tied to outcomes, but Congress should be wary of over-prescribing the measures entailed.

#### Consequences: Parental Choice

States should identify schools that persistently under-achieve or do not show progress. While the federal formulas for determining these lists have proven bewildering and should be ended, this assurance remains one of NCLB's most important legacies.

At the same time, the legislation's regime of prescribed corrective action did more to generate state and district central office jobs than it did to transform struggling schools. States should create plans that guarantee greater opportunity for students trapped in low-performing schools rather than reams of pro forma plans approved by Washington.

In New Orleans and in Louisiana, when we talk about low-performing schools, we don't start with the question of how to turn around every school. We start with the question of ensuring a great school seat for every child. We plan on that basis, using pre-existing school options more efficiently, opening up new school options, and replacing failed options, with the goal of every child having immediate access to a high-quality school seat.

Each state should develop a plan that guarantees a high quality, viable alternative for every student attending a failing school. This plan should include any option that has demonstrated a record of student achievement: traditional public, charter public, non-public, or otherwise. In New Orleans, students enroll in public schools and in publicly funded private schools through the same process. This year, a full 20 percent of parents seeking a new school listed both private schools and public schools on their applications.

And where states propose to convert currently struggling schools into better schools using federal dollars, they should be required to change the governance of the schools in question. Prescribed corrective action from Washington that maintains current status quo governance does not work. If states are serious about improvement in the most persistently low-performing schools, they will establish a point at which the status quo school system loses the privilege of educating those schools' students and others are invited in to make change happen.

Our state's Recovery School District takes struggling schools under an alternate governance umbrella, allowing either the state or a new organization – such as a charter school management organization – to operate the school without interference. In New Orleans, this has yielded an increase in literacy and math scores among student in those schools from 23 percent proficiency six years ago to 51 percent today.

### Teacher and Principal Pipeline

Requiring states to report school-level outcomes spurred a focus on schools that states and districts had forgotten about. States should likewise report and improve workforce measures. But the measures should speak more holistically to the quality of the workforce than do teacher evaluation outcomes alone. States should, for example, report entry requirements for teacher preparation programs and measurable outcomes of those programs, along with the results achieved by their graduates.

Finally, if we are going to get the question of educator talent right, we have to get beyond spending all federal dollars on short-term activities and outcomes. If we are serious about achieving educator effectiveness, states should use a percentage of federal dollars for long-term investments in scaling accountable, effective teacher and principal preparation programs, including effective charter school management organizations. New Orleans would not be what it is today had government and



philanthropists not made long-term investments in organizations like Teach For America, New Schools for New Orleans, Relay Graduate School of Education, Building Excellent Schools, and Leading Educators, as well as the nation's best pipeline of charter school management organizations, ready to turn around struggling schools. Federal dollars can help states to scale what works, and state's plans should reflect this.

Educating children, especially the most disadvantaged, is an endlessly complex activity. It requires a relentless focus on measurable outcomes, coupled with the dexterity to be creative and adjust course. A strong ESEA reauthorization will be uncompromising in its commitment to accountability but humble in its view of the federal role and its potential to create confusion more than coherence. I hope our experience in Louisiana has proved helpful to your view of the law, and I thank you humbly for the opportunity to share it this morning.